

Place - Names and Ethnic Interests: The Case of Tirukonamalai

Editing a Tamil slab inscription of about the 10th or the 11th century from the modern Trincomalee district, S. Gunasingham has the following comment to make about the place-name *Tirukōṇamalai* occurring therein:

“The first reference to the place name *Tirukōṇamalai* is to be found in the present inscription. It is noteworthy that the name *Tirukōṇamalai* by which Trincomalee is known among the Tamils to this day occurs in precisely the same form in this inscription. *The persistence of this name over a period stretching for nearly a thousand years is strongly indicative of a remarkable continuity in the Tamil connection with Trincomalee. Considering the vicissitudes to which the names of some other centres seem to have been subject over relatively shorter periods of time, This may be indicative of the stability of the Tamil population in Trincomalee.*”¹

Similar claims, attempting to utilize place names to draw conclusions which are advantageous to ethnic communities, are familiar to students of contemporary history of Sri Lanka. Thus, for example Svāmi Gunaratana says in *Sāṅgavunu Yāpanaya* (“the Hidden Jaffna”): “The fact that the Sinhalese populated the Jaffna peninsula is evidenced by the place names which are in vogue even today, and by the various historical ruins (found therein).”² Svāmi Gunaratana then proceeds to give, a classified list (running to five printed pages) of place names in the Jaffna peninsula, which indicate a Sinhalese etymological origin.³

While Gunasingham speaks of the “stability of the Tamil population” and the “continuity of Tamil connection” with a place on the evidence of the persistence for a thousand years of the Tamil appellation given to it, Svāmi Gunaratana’s claim goes further and maintains that the original inhabitants of another area, presently occupied predominantly by the Tamils, were Sinhalese because the place names used up to date have Sinhalese etymological origins. This latter idea has been spelt out more strongly by other writers. For example, Ven. Paṇḍita Kaḍavādduve Nandārāma and Dompē Pieris Samarasinghe say in their *Sāṅgavunu Utura* (“The Hidden North”)

“In place of the Sinhalese (village) names which were there in the Northern and Eastern provinces what we find today are half Sinhalese and half Tamil names which in appearance look Dravidian. . . . In fact that most of these transformations occurred during the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruva periods is attested by history. Just because something was wrested away (from somebody) the robber does not become the owner. Nothing mentioned above has so far been handed over legally to the Tamils.”⁴

1. S. Gunasingham, “A Tamil Slab-Inscription at Nilāveli” *The Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1975, pp. 61-71. My Italics. While Gunasingham dates the inscription at early eleventh century, K. Indrapala editing the same places it in the tenth century. See K. Indrapala “A Tamil Inscription from Nilaveli, Trincomalee District,” *James Thevarasan Ratnam Felicitation Volume*, Jaffna, 1975, pp. 64-69.
2. Translated from Svāmi Gunaratna, *Sāṅgavunu Yāpanaya*, (in Sinhalese), Colombo, 1955 p. 127
3. op. cit., pp. 127-132
4. Translated from Ven. Paṇḍita Kaḍavādduve Nandārāma and Dompē Pieris Samarasinghe, *Sāṅgavunu Utura*, (in Sinhalese)

Another Buddhist monk Ven. Henḍiyagala Sīlaratana, presenting a Buddhist viewpoint says in his *Uturudiga Lankāva* ("The Northern Lanka"):

"The whole of the Northern Province was earlier a Buddhist power centre adorned by *Caityas*, *Vihāras* and *Bōdhi* compounds and illuminated by the yellow robe."⁵

To substantiate this idea he next gives a list of modern Jaffna place-names such as *Sankāttanai*, *Budda Valavva*⁶ etc. which indicate an original Buddhist connection.

In the above instances one may notice the attempt, in a greater or lesser degree as the case may be, to identify place names with ethnic (and sometimes religious) interests. Here group consciousness in the ethnicist or, in a broader sense, nationalist⁷ sense has prompted "the attachment of secondary symbols to primary ideas of information."⁸ The ethnic or the nation is conceived and the concept perpetuated by the appellation given it—more particularly by that accepted by the group concerned. Also the group's history, heroes, literature and folklore, verbally articulated and manipulated by agents of mobilization contribute towards reinforcing and intensifying the collective sentiment. Similarly topographical features, natural or man made, too, assume the status of rallying points for group consciousness. Here one can cite the classic example of the significance of the city of Jerusalem and its "wailing wall" for the Jewish people. Group emotion thus identified with a place might sometimes far exceed the practical value of the object involved. The violent demonstrations and casualties over the port of Trieste after the second world war is a case in point. Although Trieste in modern times has little economic or strategic value its symbolic significance has goaded peoples into rivalry and conflict.⁹ In situations of collective deprivation an ethnic (or ethno-religious) group might cling passionately even to the memory of a place-name. For example,

"The birthplace of Ashkenazic Jewry and its language was the territory that extends from the left bank of the Middle Rhine toward the Franco-German language border. Until the fourteenth century, the territory is frequently designated in Jewish sources as *loter*. This, of course, is but a variant of the name of the king after whom *regnum Lotharii*, or Lotharingia, Lorraine, was named. The kingdom of Lotharingia, though it lasted only a few decades as a political entity, may be said to have been a pivot in general history as well, what with the crucial importance of Franco-German relations to the Western world ever since the Verdun treaty of 843. Still,

5. Translated from Ven. Henḍiyagala Sīlaratana, *Uturu Diga Lankāva*, (in Sinhalese), Colombo, 1955—p. 35.
6. According to Ven. Sīlaratana *Sankāttanai* was originally *Sangha-sthāna* ("The place of the Sangha"). For *Buddha Valavva* he gives no explanation; perhaps because its meaning ("Buddha's residence"?) is obvious.
7. As Joshua A. Fishman puts it, ethnicity is "a primordial wholistic guide to human behaviour...uncomplicated by broader causes, loyalties, slogans or ideologies," and nationalism is "transformed ethnicity with all of the accoutrements for functioning at a larger scale of political, social and intellectual activity." Joshua A. Fishman, "Varieties of Ethnicity and Varieties of Language Consciousness" in Charles W. Kriedler ed., *Monograph Series in Linguistics*, No. 18, Georgetown, University, 1965, pp. 69-79
8. Karl W. Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication*, Second Ed., Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1966, p. 172
9. Joseph Bram, *Language and Society*, N.Y. 1966, p. 49

there is significance in the specific Jewish name and it is worth preserving: it indicates that there are specific points in Jewish culture even in fields as neutral as geography."¹⁰

To come back to Sri Lanka, it was seen above how linguistic identification is often utilized as a strong basis for possessive claims by ethnic interests. Religion too is sometimes brought in. When ethno-religious values come to be bound up with a geographical phenomenon, we notice that its significance undergoes a transformation. A place with a certain name then becomes "sacred;" it becomes an object worthy of fighting for and, perhaps, dying for.

Two of the three Sinhalese books from which the earlier quotations were taken have suggestive titles: *Sāṅgavunu Yāpanaya* ("The Hidden Jaffna") and *Sāṅgavunu Utura* ("The Hidden North") i.e. the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. These titles indicate the motive of the authors—to unravel something which has so far been hidden or obscure. The central theme, as it were, of these works is to point out that what has of late been called "the traditional Tamil area" by some political interests¹¹ is in fact original Sinhalese and Buddhist territory. Perhaps it is no mere coincidence that Buddhist monks were involved in the authorship of these propagandist works. For it is of crucial significance for the destined mission of the Sinhalese-Buddhists¹² that the indivisibility of the geographical phenomenon, the *Dharmadvīpa*,¹³ be kept intact and the authenticity of this concept be preserved, at least even in principle.

We may also take notice of the dates these books made their appearance. *Sāṅgavunu Yāpanaya* and *Uturudiga Laṅkāva* were published in 1955 when inter-ethnic tension between the Sinhalese and the Tamils was most keenly felt over the question of national language. And *Sāṅgavunu Utura* was written in 1967 when there was another period of Sinhala-Tamil suspicion and rivalry over the *Raṭa Sabhā* issue.

Now, if we are to focus our attention on Gunasingham's paper, we notice that the paragraphs leading to the quotation cited above contain a historical account of the place "Trincomalee." It is of interest to note that incidents which have no direct bearing on Tamil or Hindu connections have been kept out of this account. (It appears that Mahāsēna's (A.D. 278-308) activities in the place are mentioned in order to prove the antiquity of the Hindu shrine.) Left out in this manner are several incidents connected with the place which find mention in the *Mahāvamśa*, its commentary *Vamśatthappakāsinī*, and in the *Cūlavamśa*. For example, Paṇḍuvāsudeva, the second king of the Vijayan dynasty, arriving at Gokaṇṇa-tittha while on his way to Upatissagāma;¹⁴

10. Max Weinreich, "Yiddishkayt and Yiddish: On the Impact of Religion as Language in Ashkenazic Jewry", in Joshua A. Fishman ed., *Readings in the Sociology of Language*, Mouton, The Hague, 1968, p. 382-413. Max Weinreich gives further example of what he calls "Jewish Geography". See *op. cit.*, p. 387, fn. 6
11. See for example the speech of Mr. C. Vanniasingham, M.P. in the House of Representatives on 17th June, 1957. *Debates of the House of Representatives*, Vol. 28, Session 1957-58, esp. column 373. Also see the manifesto of The Federal Party, *Ceylon Daily News, Parliament of Ceylon*, 1965, p. 176.
12. For details see Kitsiri Malalgoda, "Millennialism in Relation to-Buddhism", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, xii, 4, 1970, pp. 424-41.
13. For a discussion of this idea see L. S. Perera, "The Pali Chronicles of Ceylon" in C. H. Philips ed., *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon*, London, 1961, pp. 29-43
14. *Vamśatthappakāsinī*, PTS edition, ch. vii, lines 23-24.

Bhaddakaccānā, the future queen of Paṇḍuvāsudēva, disembarking at Goṇa-gāmaka,¹⁵ the performance of magical rites at Gokaṇṇaka with a view to installing Mahānāga (*circa* 569-571) on the throne of Lanka¹⁶; Mānavamma (684-718) propitiating god Kumāra at Gokaṇṇaka in support of his political ambitions,¹⁷ the building of a *padhānaghara* at Gokaṇṇaka-vihāra by Agga-bodhi V (718-724)¹⁸ and so on.¹⁹

Obviously these incidents are left out of Gunasingham's paper because they have no direct bearing upon the thesis he is trying to present. However, it must be said that if these incidents too are taken into consideration there will emerge a more comprehensive historical picture of this place, an important sea-port for a long time, with a cosmopolitan population and shrines of varied religions.

With regard to the Hindu shrine at "Trincomalee," Gunasingham states that its origin is obscure.²⁰ This is not an unusual fact. For we know that as far as ancient Sri Lanka is concerned, those religious edifices whose origin can be dated with certainty are usually the Buddhist ones founded by Sinhalese kings and hence recorded in the Buddhist chronicles. Discussing the known history of the Hindu shrine in question, Gunasingham then presents a quotation from *Vāyu Purāṇam*, which is generally assigned to the third century A.D., as an early mention in a literary source. Here, I should mention that I found Gunasingham's quotation as well as his translation defective. The *ślōka* in the *Vāyu Purāṇam* appears in the following manner:

*Tasya dvīpasya vai pūrve tīrē nadanadīpatēḥ
Gōkaṇṇāmādhēyasya śaṃkarasyālayam mahat²¹*

(Verily in the eastern sea-board of that island (i.e. Malayadvīpa) there is a great abode of Śaṃkara, who is known by the name Gōkaṇṇa.)

Gunasingham's purpose in presenting this *ślōka* is to prove that "by the early centuries of the Christian era the temple was well-known in India." Thus he says that here the *Vāyu Purāṇam* "mentions the existence on the eastern coast of Sri Lanka of a great temple of Śiva known as Gōkaṇṇēśvaram."²²

There are two things in this statement of Gunasingham which call for further examination. Firstly, the accepted opinion among Puranic scholars is that this particular Gōkaṇṇa shrine is in the western coast of South India. For

15. *Mahāvamsa*, Geiger's translation, ch. viii, verses 24-25. Paranavitana doubts whether this is the same place as "Gōkannatittha" (*Epigraphia Zeylanica*, Vol. V, pp. 170-3). But Nicholas believes that this is "a synonym or slip" for the same. (See "Historical Topography of Ancient and Medieval Ceylon", JRASCB, NS, vi, Special number, 1963, p. 44)

16. *Cūlavamsa*, Geiger's translation, ch. xli, verse 79

17. *op. cit.*, ch. lvii, verses 5 and 6. This Kumāra has been identified by Geiger as Skanda or Kataragama Deviyo. An interesting aspect of this deity, who is the most propitiated deity in modern Sri Lanka, is that both the Tamil-Hindus and the Sinhalese-Buddhists make possessive claims about him. For the view that he is a Sinhalese-Buddhist see Ven. Heṇḍiyagala Silaratana, *op. cit.*, p. 25

18. *Cūlavamsa*, Geiger's translation, ch. xlvi, verse 5

19. For further details see the Table below

20. Gunasingham, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

21. H. N. Apte ed., *Vāyu Purāna* (Text), Poona 1929, ch. 48, verse 30. Also see Rajendra-lala Mitra ed., *The Vāyu Purāna*, Calcutta 1888, Vol. I, ch. 48, verse 30. I am grateful to Dr. E. W. Marasinghe for helping me in locating these references and in making the translation.

22. Gunasingham, *op. cit.*, p. 66

example, V. R. Ramachandra Dikshitar in *The Purana Index* describes this place as "... sacred to Siva, in extent half a Yojana on the western sea.... nearby is the river Tāmaraparnī".²³

And secondly, it needs be noted that the *ślōka* in question refers to "an abode of Śamkara (an appellation of Siva) who is known as Gōkarna." The grammar of the *ślōka* is designed to say that Gōkarna is a name borne by Śamkara. In this connection we must make note of the fact that the God Śiva has been given various appellations by his devotees,²⁴ and that the *Vāyu Purāṇa* in another place has mentioned that "Gōkarna" is one of his "manifestations" or *avatāras*.²⁵ It might be that the place in the eastern coast of Sri Lanka obtained the name "Gōkarna" by being associated with the worship of Śiva in this particular form—in the same manner as Bhuvanesvar in India derived its name by having a shrine dedicated to Śiva in the form of Tribhuvanēśvara ("Lord of the three worlds").²⁶ In any case, whether it happened thus or not is of peripheral interest to the point I am trying to make. We are aware that as far as the Sri Lanka sources of history are concerned this particular place in the eastern coast of the island has been identified in Pāli and Sanskrit by what might be deemed variant forms of a particular name. The table below is a listing of these references up to about the thirteenth century.

Place name	Source	Date of reference	Incident
Gōkaṇṇatittha	<i>Vaṃsatthappakāsinī</i> vii, 23-24	5th century B.C.	Arrival of Paṇḍuvāsu-dēva
Gōnagāma ²⁷	<i>Mahāvāṃsa</i> viii, 24-25	5th century B.C.	Arrival of Bhaddakac-cānā
Gōkaṇṇa	<i>Mahāvāṃsa</i> xxxvii, 41	3rd century A.D.	Mahāsena replacing Hindu shrine with Buddhist temple
Gōkaṇṇagāma	<i>Vaṃsatthappakāsinī</i> xxxvii, 15-16	3rd century A.D.	Same as above
Gōkaṇṇaka	<i>Cūlavāṃsa</i> xli, 79	6th century A.D.	Magical rites in which Mahānāga was involved
Gōkaṇṇaka	<i>Cūlavāṃsa</i> xlvi, 5	7th century A.D.	Magical rites by Mānavamma
Gōkaṇṇaka	<i>Cūlavāṃsa</i> xlvi, 5	8th century A.D.	Aggabōdhi V building a <i>padhānaghara</i> at the Gōkaṇṇaka Vihāra

23. *The Purana Index*, Vol. I, Madras, 1951, p. 544. The river Tāmaraparnī is in South India. (See Dikshitar, *The Purana Index*, Vol. ii, Madras, 1952, p. 16) Earlier scholars such as John Garrett (*Classical Dictionary of India*, Madras, 1871, p. 230), John Dowson (*A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History and Literature*, seventh edition, London, 1950, p. 113) and Sir Monier-Williams (*A Sanskrit English Dictionary*, Oxford, 1872, p. 296) also have taken this "Gōkarna" as being in the Western coast of South India.

24. He is supposed to be having 1008 names or epithets. See Benjamin Walker, *Hindu World*, Vol. II, London, 1968, p. 408.

25. This name occurs in a list of 48 *avatāras* mentioned in chapter 23. See Devendra Kumar Rajaram Patil, *Cultural History from the Vāyu Purana*, Poona, 1946, p. 61, for a succinct account of these *avatāras*.

26. See Kanwar Lal, *Holy Cities of India*, Delhi, 1961, p. 177

27. See fn. 15 above.

Gōkaṇṇa	<i>Cūlavamsa</i> lxxi, 18	12th century A.D.	Parākramabāhu I stationing forces
Gōkaṇṇa	Thirteenth century (fragmentary) slab Inscription from Trin- comalee (<i>EZ</i> . Vol. V, pp, 170-3)	13th century A.D. (i.e. contemporary)	Arrival of one Cōḍa- gaṅgadeva

Thus we see that the name of this place occurred in Pali are Gōkaṇṇa, Gōkaṇṇaka, Gōkaṇṇagāma, Gōkaṇṇatittha, and (perhaps) Gōṇagāmaka and in Sanskrit as Gōkaṇṇa. But now we are faced with a new find. The Nilāveli Inscription of about the tenth or the eleventh century written in Tamil identifies the place as 'Tirukōṇamalai.' And the natural question that would arise is: How did this name come about?

Now, if we are to take the list of Pāli names and leave out those elements which mean "village" and "port" (i.e. *gāma* and *tittha*) and also the pleonastic suffix "ka", we are left with the form "Gōkaṇṇa" which is the same as that found in *Mahāvamsa*, chapter xxxvii, verse 41 and in *Cūlavamsa*, chapter lxxi, verse 18. The Sanskrit Gōkaṇṇa found in the fragmentary inscription of the thirteenth century is the corresponding Sanskrit form of Pāli Gōkaṇṇa. Pāli Gōkaṇṇa and Sanskrit Gōkaṇṇa (meaning "sambhur") is *Gōṇa* in Sinhalese. With the regular *g > k* transformation taking place when Sinhalese words are pronounced and consequently transliterated in Tamil *gōṇa* has become *kōṇa*. And *malai*, meaning "hill" in Tamil, is added referring originally, as Gunasingham himself acknowledges, to the place of the three peaks where the temple stood, to be extended later to the whole locality. Also, the prefix *tiru* (from Sanskrit *Sri*), as accepted by Gunasingham again, was added as this was a place of religious sanctity. Here it needs mention that while commenting on the origin of the elements *malai* and *tiru* in the word *Tirukōṇamalai*, Gunasingham has desisted from examining the origin of the element *kōṇa*. In fact *kōṇa*, is the most important element in the name: It is the one that provides the link with the earlier names. May be it was judicious on the part of Gunasingham to have refrained from the exercise. For, if one is eager to speak of the validity of a certain ethnic interest on the strength of a place name which came into prominence at a comparatively recent date, it is best that any mention of its possible derivation from an earlier name in the language of the "rival" ethnic group be avoided.

Whatever be the reason Gunasingham left out examining fully the origins of the name "*Tirukōṇamalai*," his conclusions on the Tamil ethnic connections with the place on the basis of the continuity of this place-name for about a thousand years invites criticism and speculation. Speculation, because historical material, some of which we have now examined, can be manipulated to put forward claims counter to the ones sponsored by him.²⁸ I have mentioned at the beginning of the present discussion the writings of Svāmi Gunaratana, Ven.

28. This has been done even previously. A book (in Sinhalese) by Professor Tennakoon Vimalananda attacking D. M. K. activities in Sri Lanka, *inter alia* has a chapter on the Sinhalese and Buddhist claims to Trincomalee. See the chapter entitled "Gokarna Hevat Trikunāmalaye Himikaruvō Kavarahuda" ("Who are the owners of Gokarna or Trincomalee") in Tennakoon Vimalananda, *Dravida Munnētra Kazagam Vyāpārāya Hā Sinhalayāgē Anāgataya*, Colombo 1970, pp. 121-132. Incidentally, this book was published in May 1970, on the eve of the 1970 General Elections. Also see the reference to the Sinhala Mahajana Paksaya below.

Nandārāma and others who have eloquently presented the thesis, based on "original" place-names that the northern and eastern provinces, now populated predominantly by the Tamil-Hindus, were Sinhalese and Buddhist to begin with. Now writers with similar convictions can concentrate on the so called "Tirukō-namalai" and argue on the basis of the history and etymology of this place-name that the Tamil people there are usurpers of a locality originally settled by the Sinhalese. It needs be remembered in this context that Trincomalee, which today is predominantly populated by the Tamil people, has been in the recent past an arena of Tamil-Sinhalese political conflict. To give one example, in the 1970 general elections Mr. R. G. Senanayake, the leader of the Sinhala Mahajana Paksaya²⁹ ("The Sinhalese Peoples' Party") unsuccessfully contested the Trincomalee seat. And it is most likely that claims for statutory recognition of the Sinhalese and Buddhist interests in the area were taken into consideration in the creation of the Seruvila electorate by the Delimitation Commission of 1976.³⁰

Finally, if Gunasingham's argument is pursued to its logical conclusion the question might arise whether the persistence of a place-name is always to be taken as indicative of the continuity of an ethnic interest or the stability of a particular population. Instances to the contrary are many—in Sri Lanka as well as in other parts of the world. In the south-western coast of Sri Lanka there is a place called "Nallūruva," bearing an obviously Tamil name, although throughout known history this area has been predominantly populated by the Sinhalese. Similarly, in France and Spain place-names with Basque connections such as Gascony have continued long after the Basques have been confined to a smaller geographical area; in northern England, Scandinavian place names such as Langtoft, Birbeck and Hallikeld have remained although the conquerors had left hundreds of years ago; and finally there are the well known American Indian place-names such as Massachusetts, Wisconsin, Michingan, Chicago etc. which remain only because of some caprice on the part of the present day citizens of U.S.A.

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29. The political manifesto of this party stated among its aims the desire to change the name "Lanka" to "Sinhālē" ("The land of the Sinhalese people"). See *Rivirāsa*, July 9, 1968. Also see *Ceylon Daily News, Seventh Parliament of Ceylon*, 1970. Colombo, 1970, p. 199.

30. The report of the Delimitation Commission of 1976 is not yet available. Hence I am depending on newspaper reports.

Seruvila is in fact in the present Mutur electorate, which adjoins the Trincomalee electorate. Seruvila is the site of a *stupa* whose origin is connected with Kākavaṇṇatissa, the father of Duṭṭāgamini, the Sinhalese-Buddhist monarch *par excellence*. It is considered as hallowed by the visits of the past Buddhas Kakusaṇḍa, Kōṇāgamana and Kāsyapa. And the *stupa* is said to contain "the fore-head bone" of Buddha Siddhārtha Gōtama. See E. de Z. Gunawardhana, *Map of Sri Lanka Showing Places of Historical Interest*, Balapitiya, 1957. The Delimitation Commission of 1959 has mentioned about the claims of the Sinhalese interests in the region. See *The Report of The Delimitation Commission*, 1959, Government of Ceylon, Gazette Extraordinary, No. II, 562 of February 21, 1959, p. 125.